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ABSTRACT

For the past five years it has been an ongoing programmatic concern at the University of Pittsburgh to provide a location in the graduate curriculum for discussion of professional and pedagogical issues that relate directly to the teaching, writing, and research projects of the teaching assistants and teaching fellows. The program was constituted according to the following commitments: (1) to ground teaching and research on a continuing process of self-scrutiny; (2) to understand literary texts as historical productions; and (3) to bring together areas of scholarly inquiry which have been kept apart, primarily composition research and pedagogy dealing with the social constitution of writing. The 20-25 first-year teaching assistants and teaching fellows are assigned to teach General Writing, and along with their teaching assignments, they pursue a year-long training program including a summer workshop, weekly staff meetings, several observations of their teaching with follow-up conferences, and a two-semester sequence of required seminars. The students in the seminars read, discuss, and revise their attempts to define a dialectic and empower an individual stance towards teaching, reading, and writing. (RS)

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# "A Pedagogy of Critical and Cultural Empowerment: What We Talk About in Graduate Teaching Seminars"

Philip E. Smith II

The CCCC's 1989 conference theme, "Empowering Students and Ourselves in an Interdependent World" foregrounds some of our discipline's central but problematic concerns. Just as many speakers at this meeting have questioned and will continue to question the thematic assumptions and language of "empowerment," so also do we reflect about our disciplinary assumptions and language--our educational ideologies and rhetorics--as we train teachers of English at the University of Pittsburgh. For the last five years it has been an ongoing programmatic concern of ours to provide a location in our graduate curriculum for discussion of professional and pedagogical issues that relate directly to the teaching, writing, and research projects of our Teaching Assistants and Teaching Fellows. To make plain our foundational principle that "advanced study in language, literature, and media can offer intellectually powerful kinds of cultural criticism," and to counteract institutional forgetting by remembering and foregrounding the debates that accompanied its conception, we constituted our program according to

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a statement of its goals and a rationale recognizing the importance of both traditional work and of new professional developments. The program is based on commitments to:

> 1) ground its teaching and research in a continuing process of self-scrutiny made possible by serious engagement with the theoretical and critical debates of the time; 2) understand literary texts as historical productions, with the corollary that 'high' literature may be read in conjunction with texts traditionally seen as marginal or as not 'literary' at all (popular literature, texts by women and minorities, film, discursive writing, student writing, etc.); 3) bring together areas of scholarly inquiry which have, for largely institutional reasons, been kept apart: primarily, composition research and pedagogy dealing with the social constitution of writing; literary and intellectual history; and theoretical inquiry into the power of language's relationship to social order and social change. ("The Ph.D. Program." Graduate Student Handbook, 1986-87. [Pittsburgh: English Department, University of Pittsburgh, 1986], 21.)

These three promises to ourselves and our students suggest our positions on current professional issues such as the value of theory in graduate curriculum, the vastly widened scope of canonical and non-canonical texts available for research, and the need to bridge gaps--to bring together the teaching, study, and practice of reading and writing with social, historical, and textual studies. These are the founding principles of our pedagogy of critical and cultural empowerment; we

test and revise them in practice with every incoming class of graduate students.

In September of each academic year at Pitt, 20-25 first-year Teaching Assistants and Teaching Fellows are assigned to teach General Writing, the composition course most Pitt undergraduates take. This mixed group is composed approximately of thirds studying for the three degrees we grant, the MA, MFA, and PhD. Along with their teaching assignments, they begin a year-long training program including a summer workshop, weekly staff meetings, several observations and follow-up conferences about their own teaching, and a two-semester sequence of required seminars. We require the two seminars in the first year of teaching, when a TA's load is one section of General Writing per term; thereafter they teach three sections per year. The seminars are <u>not</u> concerned with recipes or first aid for new teachers; instead, over the course of the year, graduate students investigate the intellectual assumptions behind the course they teach as well as their own location within the institutional structure of the department, the university, and the history of English studies. They read, discuss, and write about theories and methods of pedagogical practice, drawing upon books and articles about teaching, rhetoric, the history of the profession, literary and composition theory, and cultural criticism. In these two seminars we lay the foundations for the connections between reading and writing, for the definition of intellectual positions about teaching and theory, that are built upon as graduate students proceed to advanced seminars and to their PhD projects and dissertations.

Both seminars emphasize for teachers the concerns for strong reading, revision, and empowerment--sometimes called an epistemic or

problem-posing pedagogy--that center the General Writing course. The fall Seminar in Teaching Composition, led in 1988 by Dave Bartholomae and Joe Harris, is focused through readings in contemporary theory and pedagogy from the likes of Ann Berthoff, Bill Coles, Roger Sale, Stanley Fish, and Robert Scholes. The seminar invites teachers of General Writing to consider how writers and teachers imagine the field of reading and writing, how their attempts to conceive theories--of composition and teaching, of interpretation and writing--constitute a discourse that new teachers need to learn and enter. The winter Seminar in Teaching English, taught this year by me and Joe Harris, contextualizes the teaching of General Writing in larger institutional and professional settings: the fields of composition and English studies as they have developed out of past and present debates over the principles, social missions, and utility of cultural education. Drawing upon texts from writers like Plato, Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, the Leavises, Raymond Williams, Ursula Le Guin, Kenneth Burke, Milan Kundera, and Gerald Graff, we read, discuss, and revise our attempts to define a dialectic and empower an individual stance towards teaching, reading, and writing.

Our model of teaching as problem-posing offers our new teachers a context for understanding the responsibility and authority they may claim in their daily work. We offer our student-teachers more questions than answers about institutional history and pedagogy: that is, we wish to open and introduce problems, not foreclose them by imposing solutions or directions. As Joe Harris wrote in this year's course description, "we will try to find a way of talking about teaching that

allows us to act with some sense of mission and confidence and yet does not pretend to solve once and for all the problems of language--to avoid talking, that is, as if the difficulties of reading and writing might be made to disappear by following a certain method or adopting a particular stance or ideology."

As I suggested at the beginning, the language of empowerment might be taken, on the evidence of its adoption as a conference theme, as naming an ideology for English teachers. Just how that ideology has been understood after several days of animated discussion, I cannot say. We have talked about empowerment in our teaching seminars at Pittsburgh for several years, however, and I would like to bring to this forum some of the positions developed by graduate teachers. Our program has committed itself to consider student writing, undergraduate and graduate, as serious texts for study. I offer our students' work as an example of their engagement with issues of present concern and debate across the profession. The passages I'll read come from papers written in the second term of the seminar; the assignments have asked writers to discuss their teaching in relation to the goals and dialectic of General Writing, and in relation to their own agendas or missions as teachers. Since there is not time to deal fully with entire papers (or in some cases a sequence of revisions from a single writer), I have attempted to create a sampling of voices, and I have selected them to report several positions about empowerment.

Marianne Davis, writing a second paper in the 1986 seminar about her goals as a teacher, saw problems in accepting empowerment, understood as the creation of a self through writing, as in itself suf-

ficient for her General Writing class. She located some of the term's genealogy, and suggested what, to her way of thinking, it did not describe:

> I started out last time to write a paper about writing as a self-creating process, but I came to see that 'self-creating process' is not my term, rather it is a term I borrow from William Coles, and I have to come to my own terms with why I teach. I want to believe that working at writing can enable a person to enact 'tentative selves' (Richard Lanham), to imagine new worlds, but . . . even at its ideal level the notion of empowering the self fails to address certain practical and political concerns. (Marianne Davis, 2/26/86)

I read Marianne's passage as doubly significant in relation to the idea of empowerment: first, in her concern with why and for what purpose she teaches students she recognizes a problem with self-creation when it is only self-regarding, and not part of a social and political matrix. Just as importantly, however, she takes a step towards developing her own teaching stance by recognizing her indebtedness to others and the need to address concerns they do not.

Therese Parks, writing a year later, also mentions some of the rhetorically charged terms teachers use about General Writing. Like Marianne Davis, Therese produces a critique of the course's goals and language; she also wants to understand the value of empowering students as potentially greater than therapeutic self-realization:

> The goal of General Writing, as I understand it, is to initiate undergraduate students into a more thoughtful and

> complex form of academic discourse than they may have been taught in their previous institutional experiences of education. In General Writing, learning what is expected of a university student in terms of reading, thinking, and writing is mediated by a host of constructed concepts of the self, of the practice and value of writing, and of the teacher's role in the process. It invokes such ideas as the "sovereign individual" and "recovery" in order to suggest a kind of liberatory rhetoric which would have the student believe in the active role s/he is to play in transforming her/his knowledge. I would argue that, instead, the possibility for a mode of action which would position the student as a self-determining agent (rather than as a "literary self") in her/his own learning is an illusion in General Writing. While I recognize the value of making a dominant form of discourse available and accessible to everyone, I am concerned about the appropriation of writing, a potentially very empowering act and medium. (M. Therese Parks, 1/20/87)

The distinction between "literary self" and "self-determining agent" was well taken; but Therese did not follow up her concerned statement about the appropriation of writing. In naming it as "a potentially very empowering act and medium," she honors a rhetoric without giving a reason or relating it to a purpose or motive. From her other work in seminar I would take it that she refers to the act and medium empowering the students not just as self-determining agents, but as actors on the social and political scene.

In 1988 another teacher in seminar spoke about her understanding of empowerment; there had been changes in the structure and readings in the course, not least because of critiques like those of Marianne and Therese. Donna Dunbar-Odom, then, reflected a revised classroom and assignment sequence, one that represented itself less in terms of a "literary self" and more in the spirit of Donna's remarks on empowerment:

> To become empowered is to become able and willing to question authority--all authority--in order to see what subtexts may lie underneath the surfaces of declarations, explanations, and exposition. This means [students] will know what kind of power language has. . . . Language is powerful stuff. Certainly, I want my students to tap into that. And right now, despite E. D. Hirsch and William Bennett's warnings to the contrary, is an exciting time to be teaching. Universities are opening up because of the entry of so many diverse groups; we can see the dialectical process at work. If my students are ones on the margin, I want them, through the power of their reading and writing and thinking, to find ways inside; if they are already inside, I want them to understand that those on the margins are coming in. If no one questions authority--on the written page, in the classroom, wherever--and if students do not recognize the power within them to ask these questions, the status quo, which has excluded too many for too long, will remain. (Donna Dunbar-Odom, 1/25/88)

I read Donna's paragraph as an answer to both Marianne's and Therese's concerns for what empowerment could mean to undergraduates in composition classes. How might we at least talk about English "empowering" students to participate in their own social and political destinies as "self-determining agents" using language that had not already been appropriated (even though language is in some general sense "always already appropriated")? The power comes from informed questioning based in reading and writing, questioning that discounts rhetorics of power and authority, and in that act asserts the agent's and the language's counteraction, power, and authority.

I will quote one more paragraph from a seminar paper written last month, not to close off the issue, but only, in ending my paper, to exemplify one direction in our discussions this year. The writer, Richard Miller, teaches a General Writing section using texts from popular culture as a test run for an assignment sequence still in the design stages. He mentions some undergraduate papers he has quoted, and I think his language gives us a stance toward empowerment that recalls Donna Dunbar-Odom's description and that proposes an answer to Marianne Davis's and Therese Parks's concerns:

> Right now, the student writing I have put before you represents an effort to read culture in a new way for the students, that high culture is something that they can go talk to. My hope is that by the end of my course they won't come away from such conversations feeling that the world they occupy has nothing to offer, that their side of the conversation was fundamentally lacking. My hope is that by

> learning how to read their own readings of culture, by learning how to ask better questions, by coming to use their writing to push rather than to terminate their understanding, my students will leave my classroom better prepared to recognize and negotiate the cultural conflicts that define the world we mutually occupy. (Richard Miller, 2/22/89)

Richard's hope for empowerment is expressed without the need for the god-term; he envisions critical conversations about reading cultural conflicts, and sees student writing as a way of pushing understanding, of shaping and negotiating conflicts.

My closing question is one I will re-open when I return to the seminar in Pittsburgh: if we grant empowerment (without taking it for granted) to our students and ourselves, then how might we negotiate our study of reading, writing, and interpretation in ways that speak to the questions and hopes of the four graduate teachers I have quoted? "Negotiation," in this special sense of a culturally and critically informed intervention in the affairs of the world, should now come under scrutiny in our seminar discussions. I predict that it will come to be what we talk about in graduate teaching seminars.

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